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# **Rescaling China's rural–urban frontier: Exception as norm in the access to development**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines how zoning – awarding exceptional status to selected sites – has been used as a governance tool to regulate access to land made available through land-use changes on the outskirts of Chengdu between 2007 and 2018. By studying these claims to exceptional status and the implementation of associated policies at the local level, the article seeks to demonstrate how zoning reconfigures power locally. The article argues that zoning delivers fast, socially controllable urbanization. The boundaries enforced through zoning offer less-privileged areas unique political and economic opportunities. Since zoning carries many advantages and is ultimately governed by the state, its implementation enforces state authority.

## **Keywords**

resettlement, rescaling, zoning, urbanization, local governance, Chengdu

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‘This street will be demolished. The government wants to build an old street’, explained an elderly man on the outskirts of Chengdu, one of China’s largest inland cities. At the time, nearby industrial zones featured stupa architecture and were named after faraway Tibetan minority areas, and a new park-like satellite city was expected to accommodate five million inhabitants. Being zoned as an exceptional site almost seemed to have become a norm – although, in a further twist of irony, a sad fate awaited villages not categorized as exceptional. As a party secretary in a village in Nanbu County, under the administration of the prefecture-level city of Nanchong, some 300 kilometres away from Chengdu which had been bypassed as a site of exception lamented in 2017: ‘Here, we only have seven villages; the others almost all became part of the old revolutionary area programme, and Villages 13 and 19 were even recognized as poverty villages.’ All the other villages – bar the neglected seven – had more opportunities for public funding, because they were categorized as exceptional. Creating ‘sites of exception’ is a well-known feature in Chinese planning.<sup>1</sup> This article suggests, however, that this sort of exceptionalism is now so widespread in China that it has become a norm that defines a new development in urbanization.

According to Aihwa Ong, ‘The Metropolis ... is still a site of exception surrounded by vast hinterlands.’<sup>2</sup> This view of urbanization – as a process taking place in vast hinterlands that at some point may be subsumed under urban areas – arguably dominates urban studies in East Asia, where various forms of special zones are seen as sites of exception outside traditional forms of governance that still prevail for the vast majority.<sup>3</sup> A prerequisite for capitalist expansion is the continuous accumulation of resources as well as the appropriation of value to resources in the capitalist system.<sup>4</sup> In principle, thus, cities, like the urban logic they express, constantly expand. Often, in spaces thus encroached upon, this process leads to dispossession. In China, economic planning and political institutions have historically made a very clear distinction between city and countryside, allowing the transfer of abundant rural resources of land and labour to cities at a price below their value in the urban market. While the hukou (household registration) system assigns different types of citizenship to urban and rural subjects, the planning system allocates different forms of property rights to urban and rural land.<sup>5</sup> Both systems have left cities with the upper hand where profit is concerned, and the post-reform introduction of various forms of special zones has accentuated a hierarchy of cities and regions which direct political and economic attention towards a few highly ranked metropolises.<sup>6</sup> In China, cities are seen as exceptions, while rural areas and smaller towns continue to be the flagbearers of normalcy.

Since more than half of China’s population is now urban, considering the urban an exception may appear counter-intuitive. This article shows that, at least in the south-western Chinese context, it is not only the metropolis that becomes a site of exception in the urbanization process. Here, a number of opportunities created by urbanization are politically divided between the metropolis and its hinterland. In this division, becoming an exceptional site of poverty, ethnicity, disaster, and so forth is important – and this in turn creates a situation in which nearly all areas become sites of exception. These sites hold very different

opportunities, some of which are much more attractive than others. The sites play in different leagues, so to speak, yet the mechanisms for distinguishing between sites appear very similar. These special opportunities contribute to maintaining and strengthening the zoning mechanism.

This article focuses on the process of political assignment in the creation of different sets of privileges. In a global context, where often the economic integration of areas is understood as the result largely of the invisible hand of the market, this may seem an inappropriate choice.<sup>7</sup> However, I choose this focus in recognition of the fact that the visible hand of the state plays a very significant role in Chinese urbanization.<sup>8</sup> In China, the many levels of the state monopolize the change of land status from rural (collectively owned, not formally commodified) to urban (state-owned and formally commodified through long-term lease-outs), and the local state in larger cities profits heavily from this.<sup>9</sup> A very large share of the finances of bigger cities, especially in inland China where there is less industry, comes from changing the status of land.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the Ministry of Natural Resources enforces a system of protecting arable land by setting a minimum of arable land and limiting the amount of land that may be transformed to urban land.<sup>11</sup>

Setting out from a brief review of the literature on zoning and rescaling in Chinese urban planning, the article first discusses how Charles Tilly's theoretical work on boundaries may be applied to understand zoning on Chengdu's frontier.<sup>12</sup> After an introduction to the field and data selection, the article proceeds to analyse different zoning logics introduced by shifting policies, and the opportunities this rescaling has given to those counties included (or intended for inclusion) in new zones.

### **Exceptions, rescaling, and opportunities for development**

Framing situations as exceptional is a common procedure in Chinese policymaking from the highest to the lowest level. Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li's concept of rightful resistance is essentially about making claims that frame individual situations as exceptions to a prevailing norm of just governance.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Sebastian Heilman's identification of policy experiments as an important way of introducing new policies draws on the idea of creating an exceptional space for introducing new forms of governance.<sup>14</sup> In urban planning, exceptions also play a central role. This was the case in the establishment of exceptional neoliberal spaces when China introduced special economic zones (SEZs) featuring a market economy within an otherwise planned economy.<sup>15</sup> In more recent examples, urban zones framed as part of the solution to larger policy issues, such as industrial innovation, urban–rural inequality, or environmental problems, have been important compromises between policy agendas featuring industrial growth and the protection of arable land.<sup>16</sup>

The establishment of a new zone is a form of rescaling. It redefines territories, and how they may be used. In cases outside China, rescaling is often seen as a process of 'selective liberalization in response to the challenge of nation-state-centred developmentalism or the developmental state'.<sup>17</sup> This view of rescaling is reproduced in Ong's studies of spaces of neoliberal exception in China, and aptly fits the story of the development of SEZs in China during early economic reforms, even if the selection process was not a purely top-down exercise, since vast areas near the selected zones became dependent on the introduction of SEZs. Here, simply *not* regulating urban development led to considerable urban sprawl and gave opportunities for 'villages in the cities' to emerge along with industrial clusters, creating a new organizational logic.<sup>18</sup> While the establishment of the special zones was a strategic decision taken at the highest level of the Chinese party-state, what happened in areas surrounding special zones was to a large extent the result of local cadres bending rules that allowed urban development to be accommodated by market forces.

The SEZs were born out of an urgent need to catch up with the rest of the world and lift China out of poverty. Rescaling usually occurs when there is a sense of crisis or urgency: when, indeed, the situation is exceptional.<sup>19</sup> In the early years of economic reform, local cadres in a position to bend rules and attract capital clearly expanded their own authority by successfully claiming a right to decide over new types of resources: labour, foreign capital, and land with the potential for urban and industrial development.<sup>20</sup> The phenomenon of building authority by exercising a right over resources that are not clearly regulated is well studied by Christian Lund: contests over resources, he shows, are often as much over who has the authority to decide access as over the actual use-value of the resource.<sup>21</sup> It is thus hardly surprising that rescaling is often the result of one or more state authorities attempting to gain influence.<sup>22</sup> Claiming to be part of a space that constitutes an exception can be a way of both attracting politically assigned privileges and building up and maintaining authority to decide who should have access to which resources. Kean Fan Lim argues that, rather than a technique of liberalization, rescaling is an instrument often used in policy experimentation to build on new uses of already well-established institutions rooted in the authoritarian political system.<sup>23</sup> Rescaling does not always mean decentralization. According to Fulong Wu, the current establishment of urban clusters across prefectural and provincial boundaries expresses an attempt at re-centralization rather than liberalization. Lim argues that cities and sub-regions in these urban clusters acquire different roles. The logic of zoning thus extends not only to the metropolitan exceptions and their vicinity, but also to areas in the vast hinterlands that are allocated special roles in the new regions.<sup>24</sup> Lim's analysis, while not covering the entire nation, leaves considerably fewer areas untouched or unzoned than what earlier studies of urban regions in China contend. While in the past it was the relatively small SEZs that were made neoliberal exceptions as a result of top-down zoning, this approach to intervention now appears to cover much larger areas.

By studying sites located on the fringes of a metropolitan site of exception, this article concerns sites that are not top political priorities and are thus likely to be representative of many similar sites throughout Western and inland China. When studying the extent to which such areas may also use their exceptional status to obtain access to opportunities created by urban growth, Tilly's work on boundaries and his concept of 'opportunity hoarding' are useful. According to Tilly, opportunity hoarding occurs when 'members of a categorically bounded network retain access to a resource ... that is valuable, renewable, subject to monopoly, supportive of network activities, and enhanced by the network's *modus operandi*'.<sup>25</sup> The most important boundaries are those across which exploitation takes place. Subcategories on the exploited side of the boundary may find themselves in a beneficial position to acquire advantages that they would not have if the boundary were not there. Both in the planned economy and during early market reforms, China's urban–rural frontier could be seen as such a boundary. While definitively exploitative, it nevertheless provided villages close to cities with special opportunities through access to land.<sup>26</sup>

Following Tilly, the process that is subject to monopolization (the object around which opportunities are hoarded) in the context of rural urbanization in China is the formal change of land use from rural to urban. In a process of rapid urbanization, prefecture- and county-level governments may continue to carry out the same type of exercise for a very long time, and at locations further and further away. To them, their right to make land valuable by changing its status has become a *modus operandi*. Local authorities are able to manifest their authority by contributing to decisions about who gets access to which types of resources, and why. Though clearly not on the exploited side of the equation themselves, local governments represent territories defined as rural and in other ways underprivileged.

In what follows, I study forms of rescaling likely to be exclusive to select areas (minority areas and disaster zones), or likely to spread into vast hinterlands (new urban and agricultural areas, and poverty areas). This selection of different forms of exclusiveness enables a comparison of a variety of potential ways of claiming authority through rescaling.

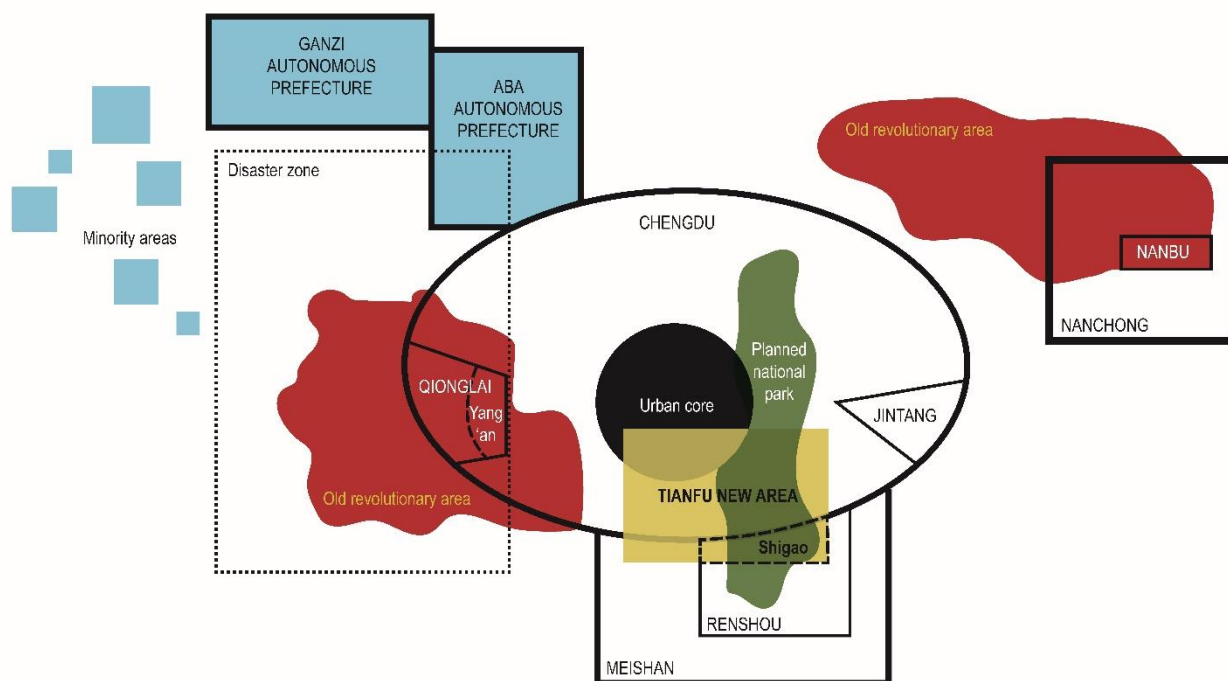
## **Field, data, and materials**

This article focuses on two sites on the periphery of the new satellite city, Tianfu New Area: Yang'an Township in the county-level city of Qionglai, part of the prefecture-level city of Chengdu, but just outside the new area; and Shigao Township in Renshou County within the prefecture-level city of Meishan, part of which is just inside the new area (see Figure 1). Both Yang'an and Shigao townships are located closest to Chengdu City proper. In China's current situation of very fast urban growth, rural areas that are becoming urban are home to a large segment of China's population.

Until an administrative reform in 2016 added a new county-level city, Qionglai was the poorest county-level unit under the jurisdiction of Chengdu (16 million inhabitants, 14,312 km<sup>2</sup>).<sup>27</sup> Qionglai is classified as an 'old revolutionary area', that is an area that contributed significantly during the liberation and is now 'relatively backward',<sup>28</sup> which placed it in a favourable position to receive benefits from policies targeting backward rural areas. Yang'an, being the part of Qionglai closest to Chengdu City proper, was at the same time in a favourable location to attract business. In addition, Qionglai became part of a designated disaster zone because it was officially classified as having been harmed by the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 and the Lushan earthquake in 2013. Figure 1 shows some of the different types of zones in Sichuan Province, while Table 1 lists the many different administrative levels.

Renshou County is the poorest and most populous county in Meishan and slightly poorer than Qionglai.<sup>29</sup> Shigao is one of two townships in Meishan (and the only part of Renshou) that is part of Tianfu New Area. Table 2 shows the fiscal situation of the county-level units including Tianfu District, and illustrates the vast differences in the opportunities for local governments to profit from land sales.

**Figure 1.** Typology of selected zones in Sichuan and research sites.



Note: Graphics by Mette Willaing Zeuthen.

**Table 1.** Administrative levels in China.

Level		Population
Country	People's Republic of China	1.4 billion
Provincial level	Sichuan Province	83 million
Prefecture level	Prefecture-level city (地级市)/Autonomous prefecture (自治州)	1–16 million
County level	District (区)/County (县)/County-level city (县级市)	0.1–1.3 million
Township level	Street committee (街道)/Township (镇/乡)	20,000–150,000
Grass-roots level	Community 社区/Village (村)	1,500–6,000

Note: Population at the provincial level and below are based on field sites visited in Sichuan.

**Table 2.** Average GDP per capita (2016/2017) and average county-level unit income per capita from different sources (in RMB).

	Tianfu	Renshou	Qionglai	Jintang	Nanbu	Shiqu, Ganzi
Years surveyed	2014-2018	2012, 2014, 2016-2018	2011-2013, 2015-2018	2015-2018	2013, 2015-2017	2017
GDP	46488	30089	36926	44896	30864	8338
Income from local taxes, fees, etc.	4133	1623	2113	3817	662	574
Transfers from levels above	2700	2860	2993	3577	3702	1673
Income from selling right to land use	13343	4165	2512	571	465	0
Land income as a share of income	61%	47%	25%	7%	9%	0%

Note: The darker the shade, the closer to Chengdu City proper. Incomes of a few county-level units are not listed in the table.<sup>30</sup>

I conducted fieldwork in Qionglai in 2007, 2015, and 2018; and in Shigao and neighbouring areas in 2018. Additional brief visits were made to other selected areas in Sichuan in 2015 and 2017. The research permission that was issued to me restricted me to rather short visits at each site, and the number of interviews I was allowed to conduct at each site was limited. Conducting fieldwork in places where similar processes were going on allowed me to identify similarities and differences, but the frequent shifts between locations also set a limit to the depth of my research in each location. While villages in some cases might have influence on land use, it became clear that township authorities functioned as extensions of the county-level units when it came to land issues – because of which I did not study township governments as separate entities. In total, I conducted more than 200 semi-structured interviews with cadres from the prefecture-level city to the village level as well as with local elites and locals affected by ongoing urbanization processes. The



purpose of the interviews was to understand the informants' context and validate my understanding of this context. Questionnaires were not permitted.

### **Urban planning in Qionglai: From a model for urban–rural integration to a disaster zone, 2007–17**

This section studies how the urban–rural integration policy and relief policies after two large earthquakes allowed Qionglai to reconfigure which zones it belonged to and thereby maintain and further develop its opportunities to profit from land. In 2007, several years after the Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao administration had acknowledged the issues of rural China as the country's most important problem, Chengdu and Chongqing were selected as national-level experimental zones under the policy of urban–rural integration. By then, Qionglai was already an experimental site of urban–rural integration within Chengdu for several years. A guiding principle of Chengdu's understanding of urban–rural integration was the 'three concentrations': the areas used for accommodation, industry, and agriculture, so that each type of concentration could be realized more effectively.<sup>31</sup> In Qionglai's case, this included demolishing villages so that peasants could move to less space-consuming settlements and thus contribute to the expansion of arable land. This allowed for the development of new urban land elsewhere through a quota system. Based on studies in Yang'an in 2007, Qiren Zhou, a liberally oriented economist, saw the 'Chengdu model' as a new invention since the reduction of residential space that was sold as a quota effectively commodified rural housing that formally could not be sold. Zhou, in his reports on Qionglai, presented this device as a way of liberating individual peasants.<sup>32</sup> However, the opportunity to sell housing depended on there being a large scheme in which the majority of villagers wanted to take part. These schemes would combine plots of arable land which could then be sold as quotas allowing development somewhere else. While this particular form of creating quotas by reducing village construction land (增减挂钩) was regarded as an innovation developed in Qionglai, most schemes simply added more arable land to existing wasteland (占补平衡) – which is a more strictly governed scheme.<sup>33</sup>

As the poorest county-level unit in Chengdu, Qionglai was seen as an area in need of help at the beginning of the urban–rural integration policy. Considerable investments were made in the form of building new villages. This was presented as an element of the three concentrations policy. However, rather than a one-to-one relationship between new arable land in Qionglai and new urban development closer to the city, the justification for urban development was presented as a moral obligation to support Qionglai's development. A recurring feature of the 2007 discourses was that local governments in collaboration with local business-oriented village elites should be equipped to contribute to economic growth.<sup>34</sup> Exceptionally entrepreneurial village party secretaries were flagbearers in the most prominent model villages at the time.

One legendary village party secretary single-handedly organized the construction of a road linking a mountain village to the lowland; another set up an agricultural cooperative that was so comprehensive that the county-level government presented the entire village as a company. A third village party secretary had chosen to give up a career as a director of a furniture company and to return to her village. Through her connections in the industry, she helped establish local industry with employment opportunities for villagers. Newspapers also reported that she heroically had saved a child from drowning and driven the fortunate survivor to hospital in her modest car. These villages were heavily supported by Qionglai and used as propaganda. The village cadres' initiatives contributed to Qionglai's status as a successful zone within Chengdu, a national-level special zone of urban–rural integration, because they supposedly showed how village initiatives combined with government guidance could help eliminate the urban–rural boundary.

As the focus on excessive land use around China's largest cities increased, defending the Chengdu model became harder.<sup>35</sup> The Wenchuan earthquake created an urgent need for rehousing and, even more importantly, it required Chengdu to finance reconstruction. One of the ways in which reconstruction was financed was by allowing disaster zones within Chengdu to continue to produce quotas by encroaching on rural construction land and developing new arable land. These quotas were then earmarked for the development of a project – either one within the county-level city of Qionglai (relatively easy), or one closer to the city (and thus subject to more strictly regulated quotas). This system was formalized in 2010.<sup>36</sup> The prefecture-level city government set quotas for each county-level unit, which they could then assign to specific projects. Qionglai, though not hit very hard by the earthquakes, was classified as part of the disaster zone. A former official within the Qionglai's bureau for land and resources explained how this was a de facto means of allocating additional funding to the county-level city. Between 2005 and 2017, close to one million peasants, out of a total rural population of six million in Chengdu, were resettled to make room for more arable land that could be converted into development quotas.<sup>37</sup> While the change in justification allowed Qionglai to continue profiting from land, it had implications for the villages. When I revisited Qionglai in 2015, eight years on, two of the three model villages fell far short of this designation. While the company run by one village party secretary had been closed as a result of suspicion of fraud, and the secretary's son imprisoned, another party secretary still served as a model. She had upgraded her car to a Mercedes Benz and had her son placed in a company developing projects based on locally produced quotas. Her village was now so well equipped with playground and library facilities that guests took photos of them when visiting. Unlike the other villages, her village had been able to adjust. Though the party secretary was forced to demolish an industrial building that had, according to Qionglai's authorities, been built not according to the plan – it was replaced by a well-resourced, Tibetan-looking recreational area – the village was prospering and producing bountiful grape harvests. Both the party secretary's business and political career were developing. She was now a member of Chengdu's party committee. Her village had succeeded because she had understood that it had to be part of the quota trade and disaster-relief policy by remaining rural, and not

become industrial as she had initially wanted. Authority became more centralized in the process, which also meant a change in the definition of categories ascribed to Qionglai: from non-exclusive (poor and agrarian) to more exclusive (when it was defined as a disaster zone). This change was paired with a general sharpened focus on land use from the central level.

Wu sees the urban–rural integration policy as a means of addressing increased restrictions by the Ministry of Land and Resources (now Natural Resources) to limit the use of arable land because of the need to maintain urban growth.<sup>38</sup> Here, the quota system fitted in very well by formally linking urban and rural development. While Chengdu's transfers – from quite rural settings such as Qionglai to city districts – were presented as unique, similar transfers in fact took place as part of Chongqing's land bill system.<sup>39</sup> What both transfer systems had in common was that they were presented as unique. At least since Qionglai had become a model of the urban–rural integration policy, its status as a special zone was used to justify profiting from the land. This became the county-level city's *modus operandi*.

During fieldwork, a recurring argument was that the massive state-organized resettlement to facilitate urbanization and more effective agriculture was simply a way for the state to ensure economic development that would come about anyway, but in a more orderly way. Zhou argued that the quota system enabled what he saw as the liberalization of rural land despite an institutional backlash from government.<sup>40</sup> Following his line of thought, zoning in Qionglai would thus appear as a technique of pulling the local state away from dealing with land. The shift from improving village lives to focusing more on accurately measuring quotas, compensating lost land, and trading quotas meant that village administrations became less influential. At the county level, however, the state did not seem to retreat. Qionglai became part of different zones (first as an experimental zone of urban–rural integration and later a disaster zone). While these zones introduced a form of rescaling that made Qionglai part of a bigger zone, the county-level government reinforced its authority, because it played a central role in trading quotas and defining the implications of the new zoning. The rescaling caused a centralization of power but also gave new opportunities, especially to the county level.

### **The national new area: Urban order as a development goal**

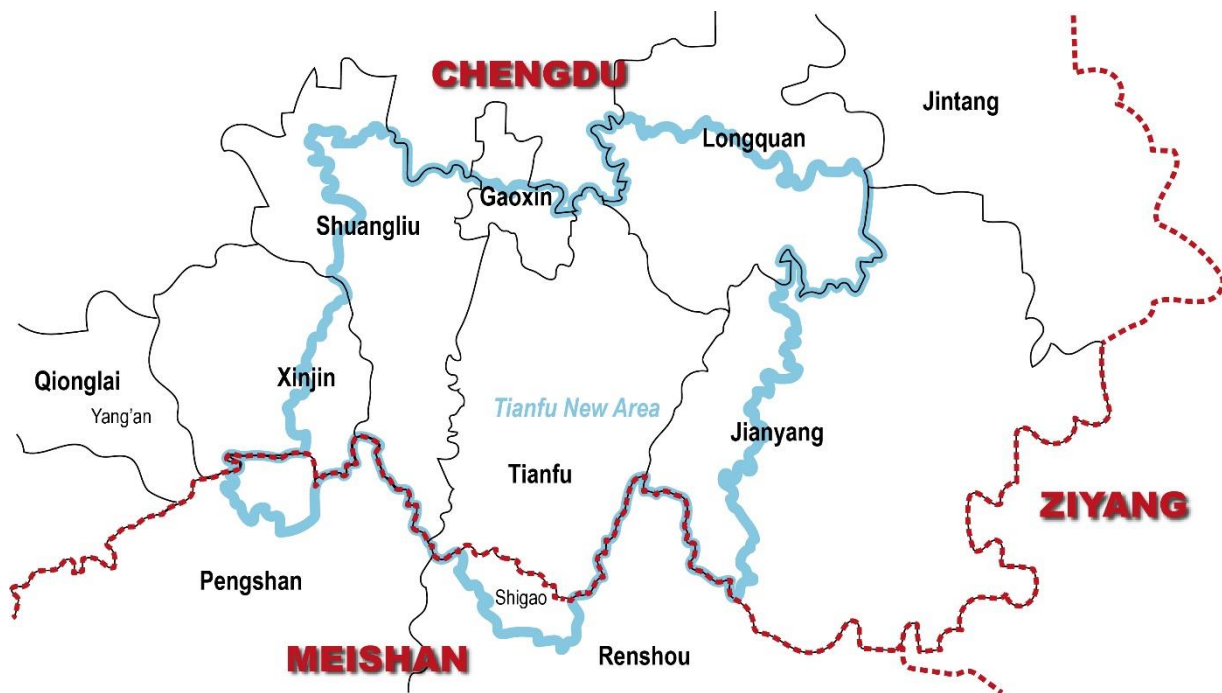
By 2018, Qionglai was regarded as only a partial success. In 2016, quota transfers such as the ones that had taken place between Qionglai and the central districts of Chengdu were allowed within Sichuan (and since 2017 even between provinces).<sup>41</sup> Because of this, Qionglai lost its unique position as one of the few places that was allowed to sell development quotas to the central parts of Chengdu. Qionglai was no longer exceptional, and new development had to be framed in a new way. In the past Qionglai had been allowed to use its land in order to solve its own urgent rural problems (which within Chengdu were classified as

exceptional problems); then it was allowed to profit from using its land to help solve the urgent issue of reconstruction after the earthquake; and since its redesignation as a disaster zone Qionglai has attempted to profit from using its land towards the development of Chengdu's 'national new area' of Tianfu.

The first of China's 19 national new areas were Pudong in Shanghai and Binhai in Tianjin, established in 1992 and 1994, respectively.<sup>42</sup> Though Pudong and Binhai nominally hold a status similar to that of the other national new areas which were established 18 years later, Pudong and Binhai were functionally more like the SEZs set up at the beginning of China's economic reforms. These two zones tested how the state could de-emphasize parts of state-owned industries while modernizing the remaining state-owned enterprises. The two zones were very clear-cut examples of neoliberal exception.<sup>43</sup> The designation of Tianfu New Area (planned since 2010 but designated as a national project in 2014) became a national priority along with the development of other national new areas, such as Liangjiang in Chongqing (2010, the first since Binhai) and Xiong'an near Beijing (2017). Unlike Pudong and Binhai, these new areas were mostly planning areas, but not administrative territories, which rendered authority over them ambiguous and gave different parts of the zones opportunities to define themselves as part of policy initiatives emanating from various authorities with remits in overlapping zones (for an illustration of overlapping zones in Tianfu, see Figure 2).<sup>44</sup> During his visit to Tianfu in February 2018, Xi Jinping declared that Tianfu should 'definitely be well planned and well constructed, with an outstanding park city look and a view to sustainability'.<sup>45</sup> Successful planning addressing the demands for sustainability was, as in many other green zones across the country, a goal in itself.<sup>46</sup> The new area was established after considerable pressure from the provincial government, which had felt bypassed when neighbouring Chongqing was assigned a national new area. The Chengdu government had fought less hard to obtain the national new area, since it was already busy developing another prosperous high-tech zone (Gaoxin (高新, translated as 'high-tech') District, see Figure 2). A part of Shuangliu County was separated from the rest of the county (now district), and its status changed to an entity with a name that reveals the authorities involved in rescaling: Sichuan Tianfu New Area Subsection Directly Governed by Chengdu (四川天府新区成都直管区). For selected statistical purposes, however, the district still appeared as part of Shuangliu. I choose to refer to the core district as Tianfu District. During the four years when plans for the establishment of Tianfu New Area as a national new area were known, but administrative changes had not yet been carried out, Shuangliu had, according to a trainee in the newly established Tianfu District, neglected to invest public money in the part of the county that was to be transferred to Tianfu District. According to the former intern, the logic behind the neglect was that Shuangliu's government would not obtain any credit for the successful development of the territory that it was losing. Besides Tianfu District, parts of several county-level units within Chengdu, two townships in Meishan (including Shigao), and part of the county-level city of Jianyang (until 2016 it was part of Ziyang, a prefecture-level city) were included in Tianfu New Area (see Figure 2). Tianfu New Area at that time

covered 1578 km<sup>2</sup>, and in 2014 it had a population of around two million. The plan was to increase the population to five million by 2030. According to a head of department in the Tianfu District administration – appointed by the provincial government – it had been the plan to grant the Tianfu New Area Chengdu Section Committee overall planning authority over the Chengdu part of the new area (1,484 of the total 1,578 km<sup>2</sup>, see Figure 2). However, in the end the district government was only given authority over Tianfu District (564 km<sup>2</sup>). To the governments of county-level units, Tianfu New Area was relevant mainly for statistical reporting and framing policy initiatives. Quotas for land for urban development were assigned through the various administrative levels to the individual county-level units. Tianfu District purchased 19 km<sup>2</sup> in development quotas that had been produced by the reduction of village construction land outside of Chengdu for RMB 8.1 billion between 2016 and 2018.<sup>47</sup>

**Figure 2.** Map showing the boundary of Tianfu New Area.



Note: Map by Mette Willaing Zeuthen.

When it was established, Tianfu District had a GDP per capita that was similar with the average level in Sichuan Province. Despite this relatively low GDP, about 100,000 newly educated university graduates had used the special opportunity available to them to obtain a hukou in the district. The massive investments from highly ranked state-owned enterprises directed towards Tianfu created the expectation that opportunities there would be rather more promising than in other places within the same radius from Chengdu. During the first half of 2017, the GDP rose almost 50 per cent.<sup>48</sup> ‘Since everybody knows that the government wants Tianfu to grow, I know that Tianfu will be a success’, one of the graduates explained. The transition of Tianfu New Area from a rural area into a first-tier locality was a policy target that must not fail.

The establishment of the zone was a display of central authority, and county-level units governing parts of Tianfu New Area could expect to gain more opportunities by claiming to belong to the zone. Tianfu was not a neoliberal exception. Its purpose was not to experiment with ways of reducing state authority, quite the contrary. Nor had it been selected as a special zone because the area was backward or in any other exceptional situation. The justification for its selection was that it could be developed to display the best possible solution to the urgent task of creating, in the south-west of the country, a greener, and better-planned China. By attracting investment and political attention, building a very large artificial lake, establishing a branch of the prestigious Peking University, building a number of metro lines, and even discussing the launch of a satellite referred to as a second moon, it was becoming clear that Tianfu was developing into a zone with distinctly favourable opportunities.

*Shigao: Picking the best from all worlds*

In the period under study, Shigao, in Meishan's section of Tianfu New Area, was home to a booming real estate industry. Chengdu's increasingly strict regulations on the number of flats that each household could buy meant that real estate prices in nearby Shigao were rising rapidly. This was because Shigao was part of Tianfu New Area, and located just outside the reach of Chengdu's strict housing policy. Already, a university town with room for 20,000 students had been built, and a leading cadre in Renshou's Department of Integrated Urban-Rural Planning expected that the rest of the township, with a population of 50,000 in 2014, would be demolished. This would make room mainly for more real estate in one half, while a national park in the other half was expected to attract considerable investment in tourism. Shigao was the home of Meishan Section of Tianfu New Area Administration Committee, directly under the governance of Meishan. According to Sichuan's plan, the Meishan Section would consist of two townships within Meishan: one in Renshou and the second in another county (see Figure 2). Meishan, however, had added another 10 townships under the coordination authority of the Meishan Section. At the same time as Meishan attempted to rescale its special zone, Renshou County made efforts to upgrade its status through Tianfu. It presented itself as the main authority for planning within Shigao and showcased the whole county as 'a key county for Tianfu national-level new area' and an 'experimental county for the reform of small and medium-sized cities'.<sup>49</sup> According to a planning department cadre, Renshou's hope was that, through the county's loose affiliation with Tianfu, it would be possible to transform the already extremely populous county into a prefecture-level city (see Figure 3). The county-level city of Jianyang, originally outside the boundary of Chengdu and like Renshou partially included in Tianfu New Area, was transferred to Chengdu in 2016 to conform with plans for Chengdu's new Tianfu Airport in Jianyang. The airport was second in terms of investment only to Beijing's new airport. This situation was exceptional, and according to debates on social



media and to the same planning department cadre, both Meishan and Renshou would avoid being subsumed under Chengdu, and retain control over the small sections of Tianfu New Area that formally provided them with a stake in Tianfu New Area.

**Figure 3.** Renshou County's 2011 vision of its relationship to Chengdu.



Notes: Map courtesy of Renshou County. English text by author.

The 2017–21 plan for Renshou County approved the addition of 6.7 km<sup>2</sup> of urban land – of which 2.5 km<sup>2</sup> would be allocated to Shigao and 3.4 km<sup>2</sup> to the county town.<sup>50</sup> Between 2016 and 2018, Renshou County purchased 10 km<sup>2</sup> of development quotas from outside of Meishan for RMB 4.2 billion.<sup>51</sup> According to a leading cadre in the county's Department of Land and Resources, these quotas were added to the 6.7 km<sup>2</sup>

that the county had been assigned. Purchasing such quotas required the approval of the provincial government, and trade was especially encouraged between poorer and richer counties. The Bureau of Land and Resources in Renshou regarded this approval as a formality. An official at Renshou's Department of Land and Resources explained that personally he would have preferred that the county produce its own quotas for the benefit of local peasants, whose housing would then be improved in the process. Though Renshou had the lowest GDP per capita among the county-level units in Meishan, it was treated as a rich county because of the very large incomes it had been allocated – as a result of opportunities to sell land (see Table 2). The county now had to invest in quotas that would ultimately help another prefecture-level city that held several nationally designated poverty counties.

The making of Tianfu New Area subjected local territories to a specific set of policy goals on land use, targets for population growth, and related issues. The success of high-level cadres allocated to the new area, as well as the standing of leaders in Chengdu and Sichuan, depended on the outcome of the prestigious project. At the same time, it was an opportunity for adjacent territories to gain access to political priority, funding opportunities, and rights to engage in new forms of development that this project was expected to bring. Many county-level units whose territory were only partially included in Tianfu New Area stood to benefit from being part of the new area; and at the same time they enjoyed the benefits of not being under the authority of Tianfu (see Figure 2). At the time of my fieldwork, since Tianfu did not have a hard border, areas far beyond the core district and the 1,578 km<sup>2</sup> new area could benefit from Tianfu. However, which areas were allowed to benefit remained a policy decision, and local opportunities depended on the particular combination of zones to which different areas could claim to belong. While Tianfu's 564 km<sup>2</sup> core was quite exclusive, county-level units beyond the core could make claims to belong to Tianfu. Approval of the development plan could provide a platform for profitable investment in more or less random areas which carried a vast population in need of socio-economic development.

### *Qionglai: Helping the rich and the poor prosper*

At the time of the fieldwork, the minimum investment required by the government before it issued permission to establish an industry in Tianfu New Area was considerable. In addition, more and more industries were no longer able to operate closer to the city, because of expensive real estate and increasing environmental demands. Industries thus began looking at Yang'an in Qionglai where regulations were less strict, and Qionglai's government even framed Yang'an's industrial zone in ways that would allow it to expand further. Both a factory owner and a civil servant working in the administration of the industrial area explained that different parts of the industrial zone had different names, probably with the aim of benefiting from different policies, but in reality there was little or no difference. The industrial zone consisted of two



main sections with a joint secretariat: Chengdu-Ganzi Industrial Park and Tianfu-Qionglai Industrial Park. Plans were in place to expand the industrial park (both the Chengdu-Ganzi and Tianfu-Qionglai sections) from its initial 14 km<sup>2</sup> to 36 km<sup>2</sup> in its first phase, and later up to 100 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>52</sup>

The names of both the Chengdu-Ganzi and Tianfu-Qionglai sections illustrate how the justification for each of them had emerged through the cooperation with partners that were not local. Tianfu-Qionglai Industrial Park was intended as a cooperation with the prestigious Tianfu New Area, while the Chengdu-Ganzi Industrial Park was a result of Chengdu's poverty relief programme for Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Yang'an's industrial zone had changed its name to Tianfu-Qionglai Industrial Park because, according to leading cadres in both localities, it had been the hope of both Qionglai and Tianfu New Area to make this industrial zone part of the planning area of Tianfu. This implied joint leadership between Qionglai and Tianfu. For reasons that I was not able to identify, no permission was given for this merger. A local businessman closely connected to a number of local cadres explained that the cooperation largely meant that factories, which did not plan on investing enough or were too polluting to be allowed in Tianfu, might be welcome in Qionglai. Despite the fact that the industrial park was not formally integrated into Tianfu, cadres in Tianfu did not see any difference between the autonomy of Tianfu-Qionglai Industrial Park and the autonomy of industrial parks within Tianfu New Area situated outside the core district.

Local officials presented Chengdu-Ganzi Industrial Park as an equivalent of an already existing industrial zone at a similar distance from Chengdu, but on the opposite side of the city. The zone in Jintang County (see Figure 2) to the east of the city was a joint zone between Chengdu and Aba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. According to a cadre in the provincial administration, the plan for the Jintang zone was conceived in the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake. The eastern side of Chengdu had not been affected by the Wenchuan earthquake and thus was in no position to obtain any share of the many quotas generated by disaster areas. Wenchuan, the epicentre of the 2008 earthquake, was in Aba, but given Aba's remote location, granting Aba the right to develop more of its own land would not generate much capital. Because of this, the two party secretaries from Aba and Jintang established the new industrial zone as a cooperative earthquake relief programme between Chengdu and Aba. Aba and Chengdu exercised joint leadership of the industrial zone and part of the taxes collected from the zone went to Aba. The Chengdu-Ganzi construct was similar, but the reason for allowing the zone was framed as part of poverty relief, since the earthquake relief scheme was no longer a viable way of framing changed land use. The expansion of Yang'an industrial zone was an ambitious project, but in many ways it also simply extended a process that had been going on for several years in the context of increased land prices and unacceptable pollution. Industries were moved as close as possible to Chengdu that still accepted them. In this respect, the industrial zone was similar to urban expansion in any other market economy. In order to construct the zone, it was, however, insufficient to show that industries needed the space. It was also necessary to frame Qionglai in a

way that justified the expansion of the industrial zone; here, political reframing of categories and labels imported from the authoritarian political system were important. Just as Qionglai had previously lent its agricultural status to other areas by expanding its arable land and then selling the development quotas, Qionglai now borrowed some attributes from other zones that would allow it to become more urban. It did so by using the poverty status designated to Ganzi and the urban prestige of Tianfu. Qionglai was thus able to reframe itself in a way that enabled it to continue profiting from changed land use. The involvement of parallel and higher levels of state was necessary in this process, both to protect Qionglai's modus operandi and to enforce state authority.

## Conclusion

Zoning makes it possible to direct different sets of opportunities to different areas. This is very useful for maintaining some degree of control over land use and, most importantly, to control the supply of urban land and prevent the devaluation of this important source of public finance. In local politics, as this article has shown, considerable efforts are made to claim specific opportunities that are linked to a zoned area. The opportunities for both privileged and less privileged areas within the zoning system have come about as a result of labelling localities as exceptional. The continued bargaining for opportunities motivates territories to push for exceptional status and thus makes zoning an even more useful tool for distributing public funds and special opportunities. Since the decision about zoning and its functions is always made by one level of government above the level of government concerned, this governance system ultimately strengthens (central) state authority. Although zoning strengthens top-down governance in China, it is not purely a top-down exercise. We have seen this in the past when local bureaucrats and governments in the vicinity of SEZs adapted to the capitalist logic originating from the special zones. So under the present system, when zone boundaries are defined by shifting policy initiatives, there are opportunities for localities to adjust to the policy that any zone promotes. In this respect, the difference between positively defined zones – which are supposed to spread benefits beyond their boundaries to the abundant hinterlands, such as Tianfu – and negatively defined zones, such as disaster zones and backward minority areas, is surprisingly small. However, the opportunities arising from belonging to a positively defined zone are considerably more desirable. Yet the mechanism that allows urban development for an area such as Tianfu must contribute towards green development, and the mechanisms used to justify urban development as part of relief efforts after an earthquake are surprisingly similar. Both require political approval by the level above, and both have to actively consider how potentially dispossessed areas may benefit. It seems that techniques of policy experimentation and categorization rooted in the authoritarian political system are as important for

understanding China's urban development as are more universal theories of urban expansion and zoning. Some of these authoritarian institutions even appear to have been revitalized.

The extended zoning – dividing the country into different zones that are intended to fulfil different functions within an urban network – on the one hand appears to be an extreme way of accommodating market needs, and as Ong and Zhou suggest, ultimately subject the entire country to a planned, urban-centred logic. On the other hand, however, the government maintains control of how extensive the exploitation of underprivileged rural areas should be. The poorest and hardest to manage parts of the country become part of the urban logic because they are the ones that are permitted to benefit from policies that allow them to sell development quotas or in other ways obtain a share of the urban prosperity. All the boundaries – such as those between rich and poor areas, urban and rural areas, environmental protection zones and industrial zones – offer opportunities to the areas that are defined by these boundaries. This *modus operandi* for regulating access to opportunities contributes to the strengthening of both the boundaries and the authorities that apply these boundaries to regulate access to opportunities.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism As Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Aihwa Ong, Introduction: Worlding cities, or the art of being global, in Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong (eds) *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2011, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ong, *Neoliberalism As Exception*; Fulong Wu, *Planning for Growth: Urban and Regional Planning in China*, Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Natural resources and capitalist frontiers, *Economic and Political Weekly* 38(48), 2003: 5100; David Harvey, The 'new' imperialism: Accumulation by dispossession, *Socialist Register* 40, 2004: 63–87.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Ho, *Institutions in Transition: Land Ownership, Property Rights, and Social Conflict in China*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; George C. S. Lin, *Developing China: Land, Politics and Social Conditions*, Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2009; Fei-ling Wang, *Organizing Through Division and Exclusion: China's Hukou System*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005; and Wu, *Planning for Growth*.

<sup>6</sup> Ong, *Neoliberalism As Exception*; Wu, *Planning for Growth*.

<sup>7</sup> Western-based studies of market-led integration, such as Neil Brenner, Beyond state-centrism?: Space, territoriality, and geographical scale in globalization studies, *Theory and Society* 28(1), 1999: 39–78 and Harvey, The 'new' imperialism, are the starting point for many researchers who had given up applying this view of market forces and the role of the state to China. For instance Ong, *Neoliberalism As Exception*; Lin, *Developing China*; You-tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; and Kean Fan Lim, *On Shifting Foundations: State Rescaling, Policy Experimentation and Economic Restructuring in Post-1949 China*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019. Some studies, focusing on economic and geographical indicators of integration, successfully show that areas are integrated, but less is said about how this integration happens. See for instance Liwei Wang and Pengjun Zhao, From dispersed to clustered: New trend of spatial restructuring in China's metropolitan region of Yangtze River Delta, *Habitat International* 80, 2018: 70–80.

<sup>8</sup> Notably Wu, *Planning for Growth*; Lim, *On Shifting Foundations*; Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation*; and Lin, *Developing China*.

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- <sup>9</sup> George C. S. Lin, China's landed urbanization: Neoliberalizing politics, land commodification, and municipal finance in the growth of metropolises, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 46(8), 2014: 1814–35; Sumei Zhang, Land-centered urban politics in transitional China – Can they be explained by growth machine theory?, *Cities* 41(B), 2014: 179–86.
- <sup>10</sup> Canfei He, Zhiji Huang, and Weikai Wang, Land use changes and economic growth in China, *Land Lines* 24(4), 2012: 14–19.
- <sup>11</sup> Lin, *Developing China*.
- <sup>12</sup> Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 109.
- <sup>13</sup> Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- <sup>14</sup> Sebastian Heilmann, Policy experimentation in China's economic rise, *Studies in Comparative International Development* 43(1), 2008: 1–26. For experiments in urban development, see Lim, *On Shifting Foundations*.
- <sup>15</sup> Ong, *Neoliberalism As Exception*.
- <sup>16</sup> Wu, *Planning for Growth*.
- <sup>17</sup> Quoting the résumé provided by Bae-Gyoon Park, State rescaling in non-Western contexts, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37(4), 2013: 1115–22; Fulong Wu, China's emergent city-region governance: A new form of state spatial selectivity through state-orchestrated rescaling, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40(6), 2016: 1135.
- <sup>18</sup> Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation*.
- <sup>19</sup> Park, State rescaling in non-Western contexts.
- <sup>20</sup> Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation*.
- <sup>21</sup> Christian Lund, Rule and rupture: State formation through the production of property and citizenship, *Development and Change* 47(6), 2016: 1199–228.
- <sup>22</sup> Wu, *Planning for Growth*.
- <sup>23</sup> Lim, *On Shifting Foundations*.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Tilly, *Durable Inequality*, 109.
- <sup>26</sup> Jesper Willaing Zeuthen, Rule through difference on China's urban-rural boundary, *Third World Quarterly* 33(4), 2012: 685–704.
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- <sup>28</sup> 四川省人民政府办公厅关于印发四川省‘十二五’革命老区发展规划的通知 (Notice of the General Office of the Sichuan Provincial People's Government on issuing the '12th five-year plan' for the development of the old revolutionary areas in Sichuan Province), 28 October 2011, <https://www.sc.gov.cn/10462/10883/11066/2011/10/28/10187793.shtml>, accessed 27 February 2020.
- <sup>29</sup> Xiong et al. (eds), 四川统计年鉴 2017, 289.
- <sup>30</sup> Percentages are calculated from the total income. County-level incomes are calculated according to annual accounts (财政预算执行情况) from the respective units. Variation in the years surveyed is a result of availability of information. The year-to-year variation of shares of public income made up by different sources is large, but there is no clear trend of an increase or decrease in any particular form of income in any county-level unit. For 2018, budget figures (财政预算草案) were used. In a few cases, it was not possible to ascertain the income from selling the rights to land use, in which case an estimate of the income was made based on the reported income from government funds and the contribution of land sales for that income in the preceding or following year. GDP data (2016) were obtained from Xiong Jianzhong 熊建中 et al. (eds), 四川统计年鉴 2017 (Sichuan statistical yearbook 2017), Beijing: 中国统计出版社 (China statistics press), 2017, 287–91 except for Tianfu where GDP per capita was calculated based on 2014 figures posted on 天府新区成都直管区 (Tianfu New Area Subsection Directly Governed by Chengdu), <https://baike.baidu.com/item/天府新区成都直管区>, accessed 16 December 2018.
- <sup>31</sup> See also Elena Meyer-Clement, Rural urbanization under Xi Jinping: From rapid community building to steady urbanization?, *China Information* 34(2), 2020: xx–xx.
- <sup>32</sup> Zhou Qiren 周其仁, 城乡中国 (下) (Urban-rural China (part 2)), Beijing: 中信出版社 (CITIC press group), 2014, 28–9.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of how the quota trade scheme developed around Chengdu, see Qian Forrest Zhang and Jianling Wu, Political dynamics in land commodification: Commodifying rural land development rights in Chengdu, China, *Geoforum* 78, 2017: 98-109.

<sup>34</sup> I have conducted a content analysis of all articles in the China Academic Journals Database listed under the topic Qionglai published between 2005 and 2009 (when urban–rural integration was peaking, 140 articles) and between 2013 and 2017 (when the post-earthquake model (see below) was implemented, 191 articles). Words such as peasant (农民), village (农村), and enterprise (公司) indicating local initiative and care for people on the ground were twice as frequent during the earlier period than in the latter period.

<sup>35</sup> Jesper Willaing Zeuthen, Whose urban development?: Changing credibilities, forms and functions of urbanization in Chengdu, China, *Land Use Policy* 79, 2018: 942–51.

<sup>36</sup> Zhang and Wu, Political dynamics in land commodification.

<sup>37</sup> Zeuthen, Whose urban development?, 946.

<sup>38</sup> Wu, *Planning for Growth*, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Ray Yep, Local alliances in rural urbanization: Land transfer in contemporary China, *China Information* 34(2), 2020: xx–xx.

<sup>40</sup> Zhou, 城乡中国 (下).

<sup>41</sup> Kou Minfang 寇敏芳, 四川城乡建设用地增减挂钩节余指标首次跨省域流转 (For the first time a remaining quota in the project linking the increase in land used for urban construction with the decrease in land used for rural construction in Sichuan circulated crossing provincial boundaries), 30 December 2017, <http://www.sc.gov.cn/10462/10464/10797/2017/12/30/10441893.shtml>, accessed 10 October 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Wu, *Planning for Growth*, 140 and 173.

<sup>43</sup> Ong, *Neoliberalism As Exception*.

<sup>44</sup> For other new areas, see Lim, *On Shifting Foundations*.

<sup>45</sup> 习近平 2 月 11 日考察天府新区 (Xi Jinping paid a visit to Tianfu New Area on 11 February [2018]), 18 June 2019, [http://www.cdtf.gov.cn/cdtf/c130668/2019-06/18/content\\_b0eed2e7c4ae491c90a321d2cf91c7ed.shtml](http://www.cdtf.gov.cn/cdtf/c130668/2019-06/18/content_b0eed2e7c4ae491c90a321d2cf91c7ed.shtml), accessed 27 February 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Wu, *Planning for Growth*, 143-89.

<sup>47</sup> 四川省城乡建设用地增减挂钩节余指标流转信息平台 (Information platform for the circulation of remaining quotas in projects linking the increase in land used for urban construction with the decrease in land used for rural construction in Sichuan Province), <http://www.scgtxxzx.org.cn:800/FlowInfo/Home/Index>, last accessed 21 December 2018 [no longer available].

<sup>48</sup> 天府新区开挂,上半年 GDP 超千亿元!未来发展更是逆天 (Tianfu New Area punched above its weight, its GDP surpassed RMB 100 billion in the first half [of 2017]! The future development is even more limitless), 17 September 2017, [http://k.sina.com.cn/article\\_2660967957\\_9e9b26150190024e0.html](http://k.sina.com.cn/article_2660967957_9e9b26150190024e0.html), accessed 27 February 2020.

<sup>49</sup> 走进仁寿 (Entering Renshou), <http://www.rs.gov.cn/zjrs.htm>, last accessed 21 December 2018 [no longer available].

<sup>50</sup> 仁寿县住宅用地三年 (2017–2019 年) 滚动计划和中期 (2017–2021 年) 规划 (Three-year rolling plan (2017–2019) and mid-term planning (2017–2021) for residential land in Renshou County), 25 August 2017, <http://www.rs.gov.cn/info/1650/38252.htm>, accessed 21 December 2018.

<sup>51</sup> 四川省城乡建设用地增减挂钩节余指标流转信息平台.

<sup>52</sup> 成都市产业发展白皮书 (Chengdu industrial development white paper), 天府新区邛崃产业园 (Tianfu New Area Qionglai Industrial Park), 29 June 2017, <http://www.cddrc.gov.cn/cyfz/detail.action?id=851221>, last accessed 12 November 2018 [no longer available].

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